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Caddy and Quentin: Last Action Heroines

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Faulkner called *The Sound and the Fury* "a real son of a bitch" (Wasson, 215). His feelings toward the novel are perhaps echoed in the words of Jason Compson: "once a bitch always a bitch" (Faulkner, 180)[1]. The novel is filled with bitches and sons of bitches as well as with bastards in all senses of the word, but it also presents several figures who contrast with the bitches and their bastard sons. Most prominently, the sisters, mothers, and daughters of the novel, especially the central figure of Caddy, prove to be the only hope for salvation for the otherwise lost characters. As these women die or are lost to the men, the Compson family comes to its end.

Faulkner said of the novel: "I was just trying to tell the story of Caddy" (Faulkner, 243). He began the book with a vision of "Caddy climbing the pear tree to look in the window at her grandmother's funeral while Quentin and Jason and Benjy and the Negroes looked up at the muddy seat of her drawers" (220). Faulkner said, "So I, who had never had a sister and was fated to lose my daughter in infancy[2], set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl" (220). The story then focuses on the events of that day, as seen through the eyes of four different people. While the narration has multiple voices and deals with time periods both before and after this event, the image of Caddy and her soiled undergarment is at the center of the novel, as Caddy is at the center of the narrating characters' vision.

Faulkner first tells the story through the eyes of Caddy's innocent and severely retarded younger brother. When the first section seemed incomprehensible (yes, even to him), he wrote the second section from Quentin's perspective and then the third from Jason's. About the fourth section he said: "I had to write another section from the outside with an outsider, which was the writer, to tell what had happened on that particular day" (238). While the three Compson brothers each voice their own opinions about their sister, Caddy herself never speaks to the reader. Instead, she is characterized through her brothers' recounting of selected stories about her. These events and the brothers' reactions to them then in turn characterize the brothers. While "a main aim of the novel is to allow the reader to piece together information and derive for himself a true picture of Caddy" (Baum, 186), we also gain insight into the minds of her brothers: "The telling of her story is the common purpose of each section. She causes the other characters to speak out" (187). Faulkner said there was no section narrated by Caddy because he felt that "Caddy was still to me too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling

what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through somebody else's eyes" (Faulkner, 242).

The idea of Caddy as the central character around whom all narration and characterization evolve helps to make sense of the section chronology. The four books are dated April 7, 1928, June 2, 1910, and April 6 and 8, 1928 respectively. Though apparently out of chronological order, the sections are arranged based on the chronology of Caddy's life. The first section, told by Ben, focuses on her childhood experiences, while Quentin tells of her adolescence and loss of innocence. Jason's section then deals with her marriage, the failure thereof, and her desperate motherhood. The final section, devoid of the Caddy figure, deals with her daughter, also named Quentin, and the aftermath of Caddy's life. The final section, with repeated references to the cold, the darkness, and the rain, as well as the decaying and the rotting of the house, marks "the disintegration and the 'endin" of the Compson family" (Baum, 187), which has come about as a result of the loss of Caddy's love.

It is important that the reader first see the Compson children in their youth, because their interactions at that time provide an effective foreshadowing of their future relationships with each other. When Jason asks Caddy, "Don't you trust me?" (Faulkner, 204), she replies, "No, I know you, I grew up with you" (204). Caddy knows what to expect of her brother in adulthood because of her experiences with him in childhood. The parallels between the adult and childhood actions are clear in the emblematic scene with Caddy in the pear tree, as described by Benjy (Faulkner, 18–39). In this reminiscence of their childhood, Benjy watches as Caddy is pushed into the stream by Quentin, who is angered by his sister's immodesty in undressing in front of her brothers and the Negroes. Fearful Quentin declares that they both will receive a whipping, while Caddy claims that neither will be whipped if they do not tell. Jason immediately threatens to tattle if they do not bribe him. Faced with this proposition, Caddy attempts to ignore his threats by countering with her own threat to run away. At this suggestion, Benjy cries out, and Caddy must comfort him and promise that she is not going away.

The incident has striking parallels with the situations of the Compson children as adults (Bowling, 565). Caddy is again dishonored, the stain on her virginity/reputation only a more serious though less physically apparent version of the stain Dilsey tries to wipe off her bottom in the initial incident. Again in this situation, Quentin feels he must personally bear the burden of his sister's guilt and must accept some sort of punishment, in this case, killing himself. Jason, ever the opportunist, is able to make money off the whole unfortunate situation by blackmailing his sister, who, despite her threats to leave, must continue to send him money. Benjy, ever the observer, watches all the actions and reactions, but can only wordlessly bellow his disapproval of his sister's lost virginity and her departure from his life.

Both the childhood event and the parallel occurrences in adulthood highlight the fact that it is only Caddy who acts; the other characters can only react. Benjy's moaning, Quentin's shame and suicide, and Jason's cruelty are only reactions to the actions of their sister. It is Caddy who has premarital sex, which eventually drives Quentin to suicide, and it is Caddy who becomes both the source of Jason's income and the cause (in his eyes at least) of a lost job opportunity. Caddy's presence or absence, both in actuality and in memory, can make Benjy either bellow or be silent, the only two reactions he ever seems to exhibit. It is Caddy, the sister, who is the active character, while the brothers must react to the ensuing situations and accept the dire consequences of her actions. By taking the only active role in the family, Caddy rules the lives of the Compson men and dictates their actions.

The notion of "sister" is an important one to Quentin. In his interior monologue he mentions "good Saint Francis that said Little Sister Death, that never had a sister" (76), and he imagines "Jesus and Saint Francis talking about his sister" (Faulkner, 70). When the hungry little girl follows him into the bakery, he calls her "sister" (125) and feels obligated to see her home safely. Though Caddy is lost to him at this point, he sees in the child the innocence that his real sister has lost. He ends up taking a beating for the "sister" he has adopted, just as he does with his real sister in his encounter with Dalton Ames. Quentin recalls asking Dalton "Did you ever have a sister?," to which he answers "No but they're all bitches" (92). Dalton's contempt for and violation of his sister sends Quentin into a murderous rage, but instead of fighting Dalton, Quentin only passes out, much to his shame. In his recollection of the incident, he repeats his folly by starting another fight. Perhaps imagining that he can redeem his previous performance, he attacks Gerald Bland. This incident again underscores his inability to hold his own, as he is knocked down with one blow. He is embarrassed that he could not even manage to bleed on Gerald.

Jason has a similar quixotic episode in which he attempts to defend Compson honor in his blind attack on the Pullman car man during his desperate search for the runaway Quentin. Not wanting to appear as if he has been outsmarted by his bitch of a niece, he rushes to capture her and regain his money and his pride. He, like Quentin with Gerald Bland, also attacks the wrong man and is sorely beaten. Both Jason's fight and that of his brother Quentin are laughable failures. Despite their active defense of the honor of their sister/niece, "the two brothers are equally pathetic and inept defenders of the Compson name" (Aswell, 217). Not only do they fail in their attempts, but they are both made to feel even more ridiculous after their fights because they have clearly attacked the wrong person. "In both cases, the recollection of dishonor leads to blood at the hands of someone wholly unconnected with the family" (216). Unable to control their anger, Quentin and Jason only exacerbate the problem by lashing out against people entirely unrelated to the situation which is also out of their control.

Having been rescued by another man from the fight he instigated, Jason is asked "You her...brother?" (Faulkner, 312). This confusion about Jason's relationship to his female kin shows that Quentin is a recreation of her mother. He replies that "It don't matter" (312), and indeed, for Jason, Quentin could be his niece or his sister. Jason continues to show that he sees little difference between Quentin and her mother when he says "The bitch cost me a job, the one chance I ever had to get ahead," (304) in reference to Quentin. It is Caddy, if anyone, who cost him the job by leaving her husband, who had promised him one. Jason clearly identifies mother and daughter with each other and harbors the same ill will for both. His anger stems from the fact that he "had been robbed by Quentin, his niece, a bitch" (309). He equates not only his niece, but also her mother, his sister, with a bitch.

Though Caddy is a bitch in Jason's eyes, she is the only member of the Compson clan to exhibit unselfish love. Her brothers, family, and the world at large are incapable of returning or comprehending this love. Her brothers have no positive or affectionate interaction with each other, either in childhood or adulthood. Jason cuts up Benjy's paper dolls (65), an action paralleled by his cruel burning of the ticket Luster wants (255); Quentin joins Jason in teasing Benjy and in his unwholesome obsession with Caddy's virginity and reputation. Benjy is the only brother who loves at all, but it is an idiot's love, faithful though uncomprehending. Thus, while "Caddy fights to assert the human bond" (Baum, 191), her brothers fight to assert familial bonds, based not on love but on a code of blood and honor. Caddy's love for her brothers is a positive force in the Compson family, while the brothers' types of love, either non-existent, obsessive, or idiotic, are inferior to her totally unselfish love and eventually cause the downfall of the Compson clan.

For Caddy, love "is more important than morality" (Baum, 192). When she cannot find real love from her own brothers, she turns to men outside the family. Thus, in the arms of Dalton Ames she loses her virginity in the search for love. While her brother Quentin wants Caddy to hate Dalton, she can only press his hand against her chest to witness her heart beating. If, as Faulkner said of the novel, "It's a tragedy of two lost women: Caddy and her daughter" (240), then the tragedy is that these loving women are denied the love they need. It is Caddy who loves first but finds her love for both brothers and lovers unrequited. The product of her search for love, the illegitimate child, is immediately the object of scorn. In an attempt to prevent the daughter from following the fate of her mother, her surrogate family commits the same folly all over again by denying her love as well. Like her mother, she runs off in search of love and acceptance in the arms of a man.

Again like her mother, Quentin acts while her uncles (her mother's brothers) only react. Once again, Benjy's moaning, Quentin's shame and suicide, and Jason's cruelty are only reactions to the actions of the newer incarnation of their sister, Caddy. Quentin, like her mother, runs off with a man, causing Jason to chase her.

It is immediately after her very conception that her uncle Quentin, unable to face the shame of his sister's dishonor, kills himself. Like her mother, Quentin also causes Benjy to moan and cry, though she cares little what reaction she may elicit from him. Quentin replaces her mother in the family dynamics in that she is the active character, and once again the Compson men must respond to her actions.

Though Quentin is often identified with her mother, she is very different from her because she lacks Caddy's unselfish love. Starved for affection, Quentin is incapable of showing compassion even for the idiot Benjy, whom her mother loved so much. Quentin is disgusted by Benjy's presence at the dinner table, which she says is "like eating with a pig" (Faulkner, 70). Caddy, on the other hand, would have helped to feed him (Baum, 189). Similarly, while Caddy comforted Benjy after he was upset by seeing her with Charlie (Faulkner, 47), Quentin, in the same position, complains about Benjy to Dilsey and "calls him an 'old crazy loon'" (48). Quentin does not show love for her retarded uncle or any member of her family the way her mother did. Caddy, removed from her daughter's life, is unable to provide a mother's love or set an example of love for Quentin.

If, however, the lack of a mother figure is to blame for Quentin's apparent lack of love, how did Caddy become such a loving sister and mother considering the mother figure she had? Between her two parents, Caddy appears to have no guidance or model for the love she exhibits. Throughout the scenes of their early years, Mr. Compson appears to have been at the sideboard, drinking away his children's inheritance. With the exception of Quentin's repeated invocation of his father's words of "wisdom" and his appearances at Damuddy's funeral, we see little of the elder Jason Compson. Clearly Mr. Compson is not the source of or model for the sort of love Caddy shows.

As the parental role models are lacking, the character of Dilsey, the "black mammy," may be cited as being the positive source of and role model for love in the Compson family. Indeed, Dilsey does tend to the children, both her own and those of the Compsons, with devotion and care. While Caddy may have been led by her example to some extent, Dilsey's influence clearly did not make an impact on the Compson brothers, nor on Caddy's daughter Quentin, each of whom also had Dilsey as a caretaker.

Eliminating the negative influence of Mr. Compson, and the marginal importance of Dilsey, it appears that the most prominent force in the children's lives is that of Mrs. Compson, though this force is not a pleasant or positive one. From our first encounter with Caroline Compson, we hear a whining and utterly helpless woman who says she is "not one of those women who can stand things" (8). The problems of her children and the Compson clan are repeatedly called "a judgment on me" (5). One must wonder what Caroline Compson could have done to deserve such a life, if indeed this is her punishment.

Caroline later reveals that her crime is that of "marrying above herself" (103). The Compsons are above the Bascombs in social caste, as Mr. Compson repeat-

edly reminds his wife. He holds up her brother, Maury, as an example of Bascomb breeding and claims he is "invaluable to my own sense of racial superiority" (43). There is a constant power play between Mr. and Mrs. Compson, who see raising their children not as a cooperative effort but as a competitive one. Each parent chooses his or her favorite, and hopes for the success of that one at the cost of the failure of the others. Mr. Compson sells Ben's pasture to send Quentin to school while Mrs. Compson is angered that he has not made provisions for Jason, who she believes is a Bascomb despite his name (182). Neither parent seems to have a particular concern for Caddy or for the idiot Benjy.

Neither parent is portrayed in a favorable light, though Mrs. Compson, by her endurance through the novel and her ever present whining, is especially unpalatable as a parental role model. Writing "In Defense of Caroline Compson," however, Joan Williams shows that while the reader's picture of Mrs. Compson is not a positive one, in fact her position and the perception of her in the town are very different. Earl says "She's a lady I've got a lot of sympathy for, Jason. Too bad some other folks I know can't say as much" (227–28). There is clearly a respect for Caroline among the townspeople which is not shared by the reader. Even Jason, who may speak rudely to her at home, is concerned with how she is perceived in town and feels that he must protect her from the disgrace Caddy and Quentin will cause (206).

Williams cites the Southern caste system as being "particularly formative in one's life" (Williams, 403) and states that Mr. Compson's superiority and Mrs. Compson's inferiority are the key causes of Compson grief. It is interesting to note that the last remaining Compson, Jason, is considered a Bascomb, not a Compson. This is an opinion repeatedly stressed by Mrs. Compson. She sees her favorite being slighted and burdened with the consequences of the imprudent actions of both her husband and her other children. Though she constantly reminds Jason that Miss Quentin is "your own flesh and blood" (Faulkner, 181), she feels that they are not of the same stock. Mrs. Compson is very concerned with the status of the Bascombs and the Compsons and her personal class status as a result of being a member of both families. While she is made to feel inferior at times, she also feels superior and tends to show upper class snobbery. With such lines as "Nicknames are vulgar—only common people use them" (64), it is clear that Mrs. Compson is as concerned about maintaining her privileged class status as Mr. Compson is about proving her unworthy of it.

Caroline's sense of religion is deeply rooted in her view of social caste. Her morality is defined not simply in terms of God, but in terms of society. She claims "I know that people cannot flout God's laws with impunity," (199) and "I was raised to believe that people would deny themselves for their own flesh and blood" (262). She believes in the harsh punishment and requisite self-denial of a harsh and vengeful God. It is interesting then to hear her reaction when she believes that her granddaughter, Quentin, has followed her namesake and committed sui-

cide: "Whoever God is, He would not permit that. I'm a lady" (300). She seems to feel that God has committed an injustice by allowing such pain to reach a woman of her social position.

Caroline's apparent hypochondria is another source of annoyance for her family but shows more than just the paranoid side of Mrs. Compson.[3] Though she is constantly in bed with a headache or other complaint, she also worries about the ailments of her children. Thus, she shows some amount of concern and love for them. She worries about Benjy's getting too cold waiting for Caddy, and Jason, standing in the rain, thinks "then Mother could have a whale of a time being afraid I was taking pneumonia" (201). Jason looks on her hypochondria sarcastically, but her fears do show that she loves her children and is concerned for their well-being. She is not a totally heartless mother, as seen in the affection she shows Benjy (64). It may be that "It is Caroline's expression of love and warmth....that has taught Caddy to love Benjy" (Williams, 405). Indeed, without Mrs. Compson's example, one would imagine that Caddy would have turned out as unloving as her daughter, Quentin, does.

Caroline's concern for her family is especially notable when she arranges for Caddy's marriage after her pregnancy. Williams claims that Caroline "is a pure product of her time and place" (406). Her hypochondria, concerns with class status, and inferiority complex are a result of her stifled Southern environment. Considering the fate of her children, which include one idiot, one suicide, one unwed mother, and one Jason, it is not surprising that she feels that the world is out to get her. When Uncle Maury calls her "Poor little sister" (Faulkner, 197) after the loss of her husband, Jason, we are reminded that Caroline Compson is not only wife and mother but also sister. Though we may think she is a bitch at times, she is none the less a sister.

The appendix to the book, written in 1945 as an addition to and clarification of the Viking Press printing of the novel, was entitled "Compson 1600-1945." According to Faulkner, it was intended to be "an obituary" (Faulkner, 225). The story itself can be read as an obituary for the Compson family, which dies with the loss of Caddy's virginity. While Caddy's love is seen by the reader as a positive force and one of the few human responses of the by and large inhuman characters, her selflessness is her undoing and eventually that of the entire Compson family. If Faulkner intended the novel to be a tragic story of two women, the tragic nature of the novel lies in the downfall of the Compson family due to love: either a complete lack of it (Jason) or an extreme excess of it (Caddy).

In an attempt to read the novel as a real tragedy, one dealing with the downfall of a kingdom or the like, the novel has been described as an allegory for "the fall of the old South" (Brooks, 334). While that may be the case, "what it most clearly records is the downfall of a particular family" (334). The Southern setting, while it provides a backdrop for the story, is not the focus of the story. The Southern setting of *The Sound and the Fury* is appropriate because "the breakdowns of a family

can be exhibited more poignantly in a society which is old-fashioned and in which the family is still the center" (341). Furthermore, it is "because the Compsons have been committed to old-fashioned ideals—lose family loyalty, home care for defective children, and the virginity of unmarried daughters—the breakup of the family registers with greater impact" (341).

Caddy's husband understands that virginity is not the most important trait in his future wife. He tells Quentin, "I've been out in the world now for ten years things don't matter so much then you'll find that out" (Faulkner, 109). But Quentin, even as a Harvard man, cannot accept his sister's dishonor. He hates Herbert and the changed value system he represents. Jason, commenting on his brother Quentin's suicide in light of Caddy's situation, says "Maybe he knew it was going to be a girl. And that one more of them would be more than he could stand" (261). The change in values, or rather his sister's refusal to adhere to the value system he honors, kills Quentin. He is unable to waver from his inflexible code in which sisters are virgins, not bitches.

Both Caddy and her daughter, Quentin, are women who act, often much to the chagrin of their brothers and uncles. As sisters and daughters, they do not try to be bitches, though they are at times labeled or perceived as such. They are the moving characters of the novel in that they move (are active) and are moving (for the reader). The Compson men react or move only as a result of the movements of their sister, Caddy, and niece, Quentin. It is around the actions of this mother and daughter that the story pivots. If the vision of *The Sound and the Fury* began with the image of Caddy climbing up the pear tree to watch Damuddy's funeral, it reaches it closure with her daughter, Quentin, climbing down that same pear tree to escape her misanthropic uncle. The remaining brothers and uncles will end the Compson family name with no wives of their own, no hope for future Compsons. The loss of their sister and niece has left them with nothing against which to react. And, since they have no experience acting independently, they will stagnate. The last Compson men will wait out their empty lives as bastards and sons of bitches without sisters, mothers, nieces, or lovers.

Endnotes

1 Quotations from the text of *The Sound and the Fury* are from the Viking International edition. Quotations from Faulkner's introductions, appendix, and interviews are from the Norton Critical Edition of the novel.

2 This quotation is from an introduction Faulkner wrote in 1933 for a Random House edition that was later canceled. Faulkner's first daughter, Alabama, died nine days after her birth in January of 1931 (Karl. 1050). His second daughter, Jill, was born in June of 1933 and survived (1051).

3 Williams argues that "Mrs. Compson's headaches and frail health might not be hypochondria—she does not run from doctor to doctor the way true hypochondriacs do" (Williams, 403). It should be noted, however, that there perhaps were not multiple doctors for Mrs. Compson to run between in such a small town.

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